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THE LAW OF THE DRAMA*

To the volume of the *Annales du Théâtre* for 1893, Ferdinand Brunetière contributed a Preface, which he called the 'Law of the Drama.' In this essay he formulated more elaborately a theory which he had already summarily suggested and casually applied in the series of lectures on the 'Epoques du Théâtre Français (1636-1850),' delivered at the Odéon theater in the winter of 1891-2. This theory emerged into view in the opening lecture on Corneille's *Cid*; and it was a little more fully stated in the final lecture on Scribe and Musset. As the lecturer pursued his task the importance and the utility of this theory seem to have impressed him more and more; and after the course of lectures was published in 1892, he considered his theory anew and in its remoter implications before setting it forth by itself in his contribution to the *Annales du Théâtre* for 1893.

In this Preface Brunetière began by pointing out that the so-called "rules of the drama" are evidently invalid. By the "rules of the drama" he meant the code of restrictions which were held to give correctness to comedy and especially to tragedy. This legislation was the result of the amplification by La Harpe and Nepomucène Lemer cier of principles laid down by Boileau and d'Aubignac and derived directly from the Italian theorists of the Renaissance, Castelvetro and Robortello. The decisions of these critics have been overruled by the authority of the many writers of undeniable dramatic power who have violated the so-called rules in every modern language. Of course, there are conventions of the drama as there are conventions of every other art; and in the drama the conventions change with the conditions of the theater itself and with the modified circumstances of actual performance on the stage. But there are in reality no rules of the drama which every playwright is bound to obey; and there cannot be any.

Yet, since the drama differs fundamentally from the epic and from prose-fiction, it must have some essential principle of its own. If this essential principle can be discovered, then we shall

*This article constitutes a chapter which Professor Matthews has kindly furnished from his forthcoming book, *A Study of the Drama*, to be published in March by Houghton, Mifflin & Company.—EDITOR.

be in possession of the sole law of the drama, the one obligation which all writers for the stage must accept now ; if we examine a collection of typical plays of every kind, tragedies and melodramas, comedies and farces, we shall find that the starting point of every one of them is the same. Some one central character wants something ; and this exercise of volition is the mainspring of the action. In Corneille's *Cid*, Chimène wishes to avenge her father. In Molière's *School for Wives*, Arnolphe wishes to marry Agnès, whose ignorance seems to him a guarantee of fidelity. Even in a farce of Labiche's the hero wishes to get out of the awkward complications in which he is involved. But Labiche's hero is opposed in his desires by the fear of reprisals. Molière's elderly hero is unable to attain his desire because love for Horace awakens the unbending resolution of Agnès. And Corneille's heroine is thwarted in the attaining of her desire by the opposition of a stronger will than her own. In every successful play, modern or ancient, we shall find this clash of contending desires, this assertion of the human will against strenuous opposition of one kind or another.

Here, then, we have what Brunetière declared to be the *law* of the drama. He made it plain that the drama must reveal the human will in action ; and that the central figure in the play must know what he wants and must strive for it with incessant determination. And this is what differentiates the drama from the novel,—*Figaro*, for instance, from *Gil Blas*. The hero of Beaumarchais has a will of his own and fights for his own hand ; he knows what he wants and he knows why he wants it. The hero of Le Sage drifts through life along the line of least resistance ; he has no plans of his own and he takes what chances to come his way. *Figaro* acts for himself ; *Gil Blas* is acted upon. The play of Beaumarchais may be made into an acceptable novel, but the novel of Le Sage cannot be made into an acceptable play. A novel may be dramatized successfully only when it is inherently dramatic,—that is to say, only when its central figure is master of his fate and captain of his soul. Action in the drama is thus seen to be not mere movement or external agitation ; but is the assertion of a will which knows itself.

Brunetière maintained also that when this law of the drama is

once firmly grasped, it will help to differentiate more precisely the several dramatic species. If the obstacles against which the will of the hero has to contend are insurmountable,—Fate or Providence or the laws of nature,—then there is tragedy, and the end of the struggle is likely to be death, since the hero is defeated in advance. But if these obstacles are not absolutely insurmountable, being only social conventions and human prejudices, then he has a possible chance to attain his desire ;—and in this case we have the serious drama without an inevitably fatal ending. Change this obstacle a little, equalize the conditions of the struggle, set two human wills in opposition ;—and there we have comedy. And if the obstacle is of a still lower order, merely an absurdity of custom, for instance, we find ourselves in farce. Of course, these several dramatic species rarely exist in complete purity of type ; comedy often declines into farce, for example, and farce not infrequently elevates itself toward comedy.

Brunetière found a confirmation of his theory in the fact that the drama has most amply flourished when the national will has stiffened itself for a magnificent effort. Greek tragedy is contemporary with Salamis ; and the Spanish drama is contemporary with the conquest of the new world. Shakespeare was a man when the Armada was repulsed ; Corneille and Molière were made possible by the work of Henry IV and Richelieu ; Lessing and Goethe and Schiller came after Frederick. And the Orientals have no vital drama because they are fatalists, because they do not believe in that free will without which the drama cannot exist. It is significant that men of action, Richelieu, Condé, Frederick, Napoleon, have ever been fond of the theater. A belief in free will is always favorable to the drama, whereas a belief in foreordination is not unfavorable to the novel, the heroes of which are not called upon to know their own minds.

Here Brunetière rested his case. He concluded by calling attention to the difference between the so-called rules of the drama—which are always narrow, always rigid and always certain to be broken sooner or later because of this narrow rigidity— and this one single law of the theater, as he stated it, large, supple, flexible in its application, very simple in itself and yet very general, very rich in its consequences, and ever ready to

enrich itself still further by all the confirmations which experience and reflection may supply.

It is not too much to say that this statement of the law of the drama is the most suggestive and the most important contribution to the theory of the theater which has been made for many years. It is as significant as any of Lessing's contributions to the theory of art. The more clearly it is perceived the more illuminating it will be found. Brunetière has here given us the key to many an obscurity. He has provided us with an instrument for gauging the true dramatic value of a play. He has put into our hands the means whereby we can explain difficulties otherwise very puzzling. For instance, he has enabled us to see why it is that the mediæval mysteries, and also the English chronicle-plays (which more or less follow the mediæval model), are not so interesting as the tragedies in which we find the hero "at war with the words of fate." To the central figure of the chronicle play things merely happen, and while we may be interested now and again in the separate episodes, our attention is only languidly held by the story as a whole ; whereas the central figure of the tragedian stands forth the embodiment of will, knowing what he wants and bending all his powers to the accomplishment of his purpose. This law of the drama explains also why novels abounding in variety of incident have often failed to attract the public when they were dramatized.

If any cavil must be made, it is that Brunetière took upon himself to lay down the law somewhat arbitrarily. Perhaps it might have been better to say that a comparison of all the masterpieces of the drama, and of all the plays of less value which have now and again achieved a fleeting success on the stage, discloses the fact that the attention of an audience in a theater can be aroused and retained only by an exhibition of the human will. As individuals we can find pleasure in reading about the misadventures of characters with no minds of their own ; but when we are massed together as spectators in the play-house these nerveless creatures no longer satisfy us and we demand men of a sterner sort, with iron in the blood to struggle valiantly for the desire of their hearts. The career of a character to whom things merely happen seems to us insufficiently in-

teresting when it is represented before us collectively in action on the stage, although we may severally follow such a career more or less eagerly when we read about it in the study. It is true that now and again a piece may delight some few of us solely by its subtle revelations of character or its ironic pictures of life; but the plays which have pleased long and pleased many have always an essential struggle to serve as a backbone.

In other words, what Brunetière promulgated as a hard and fast decree may be set forth, if we prefer another statement, as a logical deduction from the accumulated experience of mankind. It is only fair to point out that Brunetière, even though he allowed himself to declare the law rather authoritatively, asserted it to be derived from observation. And his theory is a contribution to the study of the psychology of the crowd, as distinguished from the psychology of the individual human units who make up the mass.

While the credit for declaring this law thus clearly and of applying it so as to bring out the special quality of the drama and to make plain the fundamental difference between a play and a novel, is undoubtedly due to Brunetière, he had not a few predecessors who had at least glimpsed the theory which he was to isolate sharply. It is impossible that so pregnant a truth about one of the chiefest of the arts should not have been perceived by earlier critics. Voltaire, for example, in one of his letters asserted that every scene in a play should represent a combat; and Stevenson declares that "a good serious play must be founded on one of the passionate *crucies* of life, where duty and inclination come nobly to the grapple." This coincides with Schlegel's assertion that tragedy deals with the moral freedom of man, which can be displayed only "in a conflict with his sensuous impulses." So Coleridge emphasized the fact that accidents ought not to be introduced into tragedy, since "in the tragic the free will of man is the first cause." And in *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe had gone so far as to say that, while the hero of a novel might be passive, the hero of a play must be active, since "all events oppose him, and he either clears and removes every obstacle out of his path, or else he becomes their victim."

Probably the source of the opinions of Goethe and Schlegel is

to be sought in Hegel, who has treated tragedy at length and with his customary subtlety. In setting forth compactly Hegel's opinions, Professor Bradley admits that "in all tragedy there is some sort of collision or conflict — conflict of feelings, modes of thought, desires, wills, purposes; conflict of persons with one another, or with circumstances or with themselves." Then the British critic brings out the German philosopher's insistence on the essential point that "pity for mere misfortune, like fear of it, is not tragic pity or fear," since "these are due to the spectacle of the conflict and its attendant suffering, which do not appeal simply to our sensibilities or our instinct of self-preservation, but also to our deeper mind or spirit." This truly tragic conflict appeals to our spirit because it is of the spirit, being a conflict "between powers that rule man's spiritual life and have the right to rule it. They are the substance of humanity, and especially of man's ethical nature. The family and the state, the bond of parent and child, of brother and sister, of husband and wife, of citizen and ruler, or citizen and citizen, with the obligations and feelings appropriate to these bonds; and again the powers of personal love and honor, or of devotion to a great cause or an ideal interest like religion or science, or some kind of social welfare — such are the forces exhibited in tragic action." And as these are all acknowledged to be "powers rightfully claiming human obedience, their exhibition in tragedy has that interest, at once deep and universal, which is essential to a great work of art."

Brunetière's theory may be more or less contained in Hegel's theory; but it needed to be extracted and set apart. Quite possibly the German philosopher may have exerted an influence upon the French critic. Brunetière's immediate predecessors, his elder contemporaries in criticism, Renan and Taine and Scherer, had all been nourished on the German philosopher. Taine had given a year of his youth to incessant absorption of Hegel, whom he described as "Spinoza multiplied by Aristotle." It was from Hegel that Taine took over his own theory of the influence of race and locality upon the development of literature. It would excite no wonder if we should find Brunetière, who was so profoundly influenced by Taine, in his turn

elaborating a pregnant suggestion of Taine's master; and the French critic might be totally unconscious of the source from which he had derived the elements of his theory.

But is Brunetière's law of the drama really contained in Hegel's theory of tragedy? After all, Hegel is dealing with tragedy merely, and not with the whole range of the drama; and he is only giving his own analysis of the old theory of the tragic conflict. Brunetière went much further and declared a principle by which the drama as a whole is differentiated absolutely from the epic and prose-fiction. The French critic's law governs comedy and farce as well as tragedy. Furthermore, even in considering tragedy, Brunetière laid stress not so much on the circumstances of the conflict, of the struggle in which the hero is involved, as on the assertion of the hero's will. He made plain the fact that the truly dramatic element does not lie in the mere clash of contending forces, but rather in the volition of the hero himself, in the firm resolution which steels a man for the struggle. This is a most significant simplification of the older idea; and it is most helpful.

In this simplification Brunetière has gone behind Hegel; indeed, it may be said that he has gone back to Aristotle. The "Master of all that know" was ever the ardent champion of free will against determinism; and perhaps this sympathetic advocacy of a principle which we must now acknowledge to be the fundamental characteristic of the drama is added evidence that Aristotle was not only the first but also the foremost of dramatic critics. He held Sophocles to be the mightiest of the three great Greek dramatic poets; and one reason for this preference is probably his keen appreciation of the dramaturgic dexterity of the author of *Ædipus*, the mystery of construction, the sheer playmaking skill revealed again and again; but another reason might be found in the fact that Sophocles never allowed his hero to be a mere plaything in the hands of fate, and always so contrived his story that the impending curse did not become operative except by the volition of the individual.

Aristotle anticipated Coleridge in ruling out accidents and in declaring that poetry rebels against the rule of chance. And he emphasized the necessity of plot; that is, of a story guided by

the human will. "Without action there cannot be a tragedy," he asserts; "there may be without character." As Professor Butcher has explained, "The drama not only implies emotion expressing itself in a complete and significant action and tending toward a certain end, it also implies a conflict." The British scholar has also suggested that "we may even modify Aristotle's phrase and say that the dramatic conflict, not the mere plot, is 'the soul of tragedy.'" And we may in turn modify Professor Butcher's phrase and say that the soul of the drama is not in the dramatic conflict as much as in the assertion of the human will which is the cause of the conflict.

That these modifications are necessary is evidence that Brunetière's law of the drama is not explicit in Aristotle's treatise, any more than in Hegel's, although it may be a development of their several theories which they would both of them accept. It was Brunetière who shifted the emphasis from the more or less external conflict to the internal act of volition which determines the struggle. It was the French critic who first made it unmistakably plain that the drama depends on man's free will. He supported his doctrine by examples drawn mainly from the French drama; but other illustrations as striking can be found in other literatures.

The development of English tragedy, for example, out of the lax chronic-play, which was only a straggling panorama of the events of a reign, was due largely to the influence exerted by Seneca's tragedies, poor enough as plays, but vigorous in the stoical assertion of man's power over himself and of his right to control his own destiny. As Mr. Courthope has pointed out, "What we find in Marlowe is Seneca's exaltation of the human will, disassociated with the idea of necessity." This development of English tragedy may even have been helped a little by the remoter influence of Machiavelli, traces of which are abundant throughout Elizabethan literature. The so-called Machiavelian villains of the tragedy-of-blood may reveal a total misconception of the acute Italian's principles; and yet, none the less may the sharpening of the dramatic conflict have been helped at least a little by his reiterated assertion of the duty of the strong man to work as best he can, deciding all doubtful points in his

own interest. And it may be noted also that Machiavelli was himself a dramatist, and that if he never wrote a tragedy he was the author of one of the liveliest of Italian comedies, which was also one of the very few that really repaid actual performance before an audience.

The chief advantage of Brunetière's law is that it enables us to set off the true dramatic conflict from the grosser forms of combat. The drama cannot exist without the theater; and the theater is only a little differentiated from the amphitheater. The stage is first cousin to the arena; and Professor Groos was on safe ground when he asserted that "the pleasure afforded by the drama has one very essential feature in common with ring contests, animal fights, races, etc.,—namely that of observing a struggle in which we may inwardly participate."

In the ancient arena the gladiators fought to the death; and with so poignant a presentation of the dramatic conflict as this no Roman playwright could hope to compete. In the modern circus the bloodless effort to overcome difficulty has often an element of lurking danger which supplies an added piquancy. Even at its loftiest elevation the drama cannot help having an obvious kinship with the show-business; and as we climb from the cruel and deadly sports of the colosseum past the startling exploits of the circus up to the sumptuous spectacle of the ballet, and thus at last aloft to the subtlety of a comedy and the serenity of tragedy, we find the several steps of our ascent shading into each other, until we cannot tell exactly where it was that the true drama actually emerged into view. Here Brunetière's law may serve as a test, in that it shifts the emphasis from the outer struggle to the inner stiffening of the human will, which controls the combat.

When we have once accepted and assimilated Brunetière's law of the drama, we can utilize it to interpret a principle laid down by Sarcey. That very practical critic, who passed all his evenings in the theater and who deduced all his theories from observation of the effect of the acted drama upon audiences, declared that in every story which is fit to be set on the stage there are certain episodes or interviews which must be shown in action and which cannot be narrated by the characters. He called

these the "scenes that must be treated," the *scènes à faire*. If any one of these essential scenes is shirked by the playwright, if he describes it in his dialogue, instead of letting the spectators see it for themselves, then the audience will be disappointed and their interest will flag.

The spectators may not be able to declare the reason for their dissatisfaction; but they will be vaguely aware that they have been deprived of something to which they were entitled. They feel that they have been defrauded of their just expectations, if they are not made eye-witnesses of a vital incident which the inexperienced dramatist has chosen to bring about behind closed doors or during one of the intermissions between the acts. Sarcey insisted that there was a certain test of the born playwrights, of the artists who have an instinctive mastery of the theater, that they have always an unerring intuition as to the meetings which the spectators will expect to see.

Now, what are the essential scenes without which a play will fail to impress the audience? What are these scenes which must be shown in action? Obviously, they are the scenes in which we can see the struggle of contending wills. They are the episodes wherein the dramatic conflict enters on its acutest stage, the interviews wherein there is the actual collision of the several resolves, the clash of volition against volition. They are those wherein "passion must appear upon the scene and utter its last word,"—to borrow Stevenson's apt phrase. Thus we see that Sarcey's theory links itself logically with Brunetière's. The essential characteristic of the drama is that it deals with the human will; and a play therefore loses interest for the audience when the playwright fails to let us see for ourselves the acute crisis of this clash of contending determinations.

Brunetière and Sarcey derived their theories from observation of the practice of the great dramatists; and there is no difficulty in adducing illustrations from the masterpieces of the drama in support of these theories. All the great dramatists, ancient and modern, have done instinctively what Brunetière and Sarcey declared to be necessary. In the *Agamemnon*, for example, Æschylus lets the murder of his chief character take place out of sight, for that is only the inevitable conse-

quence of the meeting of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra which he sets before us. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare shows us the guilty determination of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth just before the murder of Duncan, which is itself all the more impressive because it is not shown. In *Othello*, we are made witnesses of the working of the poison of jealousy in Othello as this is distilled by Iago.

In *Tartuffe*, Molière puts before us the attempt which the sanctimonious rogue makes upon the virtue of Elenoire; just as Sheridan sets on the stage the assault of Joseph upon Lady Teazle. In the *Doll's House*, Ibsen lets us hear all that Nora has to say after she has discovered the depths of her husband's pettiness. The expert playwright of every age has been aware that spectators are interested only in what they can see for themselves and that they remain but tepidly attentive to what is told them. It is the special privilege of the theater that it can make a visible appeal, with all the impressiveness of the thing actually seen and not merely narrated. And it is only at his peril that the playwright fails to profit by this privilege.

The validity of the principles laid down by Brunetière and by Sarcey we can all of us test for ourselves when we analyze the impression made upon us in the theater. If we have found ourselves languid and bored, we have only to analyze the conduct of the story to discover the cause of our dumb dissatisfaction and to assure ourselves that the playwright failed to present before us the essential scenes of the essential struggle. On the other hand, when a play, tragedy or comedy, melodrama or farce, has held our attention, a little analysis will reveal to us that this is because the dramatist has made us spectators of the scenes that must be treated to bring out the full value of the clash of contending volitions.

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